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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001194

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN; DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/18/2019

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SCUL](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: IS RFE/RL LOSING ITS TURKMEN AUDIENCE?

REF: A. ASHGABAT 0045

[1](#)B. ASHGABAT 499

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: RFE/RL journalists continue to work despite ongoing government harassment. An Ashgabat-based reporter thinks the Prague-based staff is under pressure from the Turkmen security service to moderate its reporting. As a result, the reporting has weakened, and RFE/RL is losing its local audience. The reporter recounted several incidents that included denying people the right to travel or showed a lack of concern for citizens. Some of the reporter's comments could relate to a policy dispute inside RFE/RL's Turkmen Service and indicate that, at least from the view in the field, a lack of relevance in RFE/RL broadcasts could be taking a toll on listenership. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) On September 12, poloff met with local RFE/RL reporter Halmyrat Gylychdurdiyev to discuss his working conditions and his impression of the current situation in Turkmenistan. Gylychdurdiyev said the Turkmen government continues its steady harassment of him and his family. He can neither receive nor place international calls from his home phone. At the beginning of this year, a Polish journalist visiting Turkmenistan called him and attempted to arrange a meeting. Just as she was about to tell Gylychdurdiyev where she was, the line went dead. No one in his family is allowed to travel abroad. Gylychdurdiyev's daughter was denied permission to travel to Poland earlier this year and told that she would not be allowed to leave the country for 50 years. (NOTE: Gylychdurdiyev's daughter traveled to Moscow for medical treatment in 2008. She is employed as a security guard at the Embassy. END NOTE.) Gylychdurdiyev's son cannot find a job, nor can he open his own business. When he tries to rent commercial space to open a shop, pressure is put on the landlord by the security service.

[1](#)3. (C) Despite the obstacles, Gylychdurdiyev considered his work for RFE/RL to be going "normally." He communicates with RFE/RL every other day via Internet. "As long as my heart is beating, I will work for RFE/RL." He thought that once he is "no longer around," it would be easy for the Turkmen government to silence the other RFE/RL contributors in Turkmenistan, Gylychdurdiyev having recruited and mentored

the others. But rather than putting pressure on the journalists, Gylychdurdiyev said security officials are pursuing a different course. He commented that there is less Turkmenistan-related reporting on RFE/RL than previously. He attributed this to the fact the RFE/RL staff in Prague is ethnic Turkmen and has intentionally cut back on reporting due to threats by the Turkmen security service against family members still living in Turkmenistan. He received this information from a Turkmen journalist who had traveled to Prague and met with RFE/RL Turkmen staff. For example, Gylychdurdiyev said the director of the Turkmen Service has a younger brother in a Turkmen prison and is subject to pressure. Because of this change in the content of RFE/RL Turkmen programming, Gylychdurdiyev said RFE/RL broadcasts do not differ much from Turkmen government broadcast news. RFE/RL is losing Turkmen listeners, some of whom say the broadcasts are weaker and no longer as interesting as they were previously. He suggested that RFE/RL headquarters in Washington look into the matter because criticism of Turkmen policies has become weak.

14. (C) Gylychdurdiyev described two reports that he submitted to RFE/RL, but that were not broadcast. The first dealt with a ferry accident on the Amu Darya River in 1997-98 in which a bus with 50 passengers sank to the bottom of the river. There was only one survivor and to this day the bus, which sits under 16 feet of water, and the bodies of the victims remain on the bottom of the river. To Gylychdurdiyev, the account says a lot about the indifference of the Turkmen government to the situation of its people. His source was a lawyer who had spoken personally with the survivor of the

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accident. The second report that was not broadcast, recounted to him by a writer with first-hand information, described the case of two young men who found a suitcase containing drugs and money washed up on the bank of the Amu Darya. After the two men turned the suitcase over to the authorities, they were accused of withholding some additional drugs and money, beaten, sentenced and imprisoned.

15. (C) As a further illustration of the government's indifference to its citizens, Gylychdurdiyev recounted the story of a woman two weeks shy of her 35th birthday who was not allowed to leave the country. (NOTE: The migration authorities selectively apply an informal rule that women younger than 35 years old can not travel to Turkey or Middle Eastern destinations unless accompanied by either a male or an older woman. It appears to be an effort to fight trafficking. END NOTE.) Authorities asked the woman to bring her parents to confirm that she had their consent to depart. The woman brought a statement from a psychiatric hospital that her mother was a patient, but the officials insisted that the mother herself appear. After the mother was brought from the hospital, the officials still refused the woman permission to depart, explaining that the follow-up was only to see if she had told the truth.

16. (C) According to Gylychdurdiyev, the Ministry of National Security (MNB) decides who can or cannot depart the country. However, upon inquiry, MNB officials never give a concrete reason for the restriction and quite often people have no idea why they are subject. In some cases, people are denied permission to depart as the result of sheer corruption. Gylychdurdiyev told about one ethnic Russian family who, upon departure to emigrate permanently to Russia, was asked to pay \$3,000 in order to be allowed to leave.

17. (C) COMMENT: While the government continues its steady pressure on RFE/RL journalists (Ref A), they continue to work and send reports to Prague. Although post cannot confirm Gylychdurdiyev's comments about GOTX pressure on RFE/RL staff in Prague, they could be related to earlier reports of an internal dispute in the Prague office between advocates of "salty" and "informative" reporting (Ref B). It should also be noted that Gylychdurdiyev has exaggerated in the past. In

post's monitoring of RFE/RL's Turkmen language human rights programming, we have noticed lately that reports by Turkmenistan-based correspondents tend to involve commentary on new legislation. Given Gylychdurdiyev's comments about declining listenership in Turkmenistan, it appears RFE/RL has yet to find the proper balance in its reporting. END
COMMENT.
CURRAN